

## ■ MALI

### Preliminary Results of Excavations in Timbuktu, September 1998.

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The results of a preliminary survey completed in Timbuktu in 1996 were reported in *Nyame Akuma* 47 (Insoll 1997a). A first season of excavations in the city were completed in September 1998, which, as far as the author is aware, are the first to be undertaken within the city itself. The aims of the project were to assess the origins and development of the city through archaeological evidence. Thus similar to research already completed in the neighbouring city of Gao (Insoll 1995, 1996, 1997b, in preparation).

### TIM 98 (A) and (B)

To help achieve these aims two sondages of 2 m<sup>2</sup> were started in an area which had been identified previously through survey as a zone of possible early occupation, the Moroccan Casbah, situated in the Sankore quarter of Timbuktu (Insoll 1998). These were assigned the codes TIM 98 (A) and TIM 98 (B) (Figure 1).

The uppermost layers of both test-pits were composed of modern rubbish as the area investigated was formed of a slope of debris banked up against the wall of the modern gendarmerie, the former French colonial cavalry barracks. The latter fact was indicated by various layers of horse dung. Unfortunately, the unstable nature of the deposits at the upper, deeper part of the slope, a mixture of ash, sand, dung, and various items of rubbish (textiles, plastic, metals etc.), meant that excavation of TIM 98 (A) had to be halted at a depth of some 1.5 m. The risk to the workmen was deemed too great to proceed any further. These problems were not such an immediate factor in TIM 98 (B) and excavation was continued here to a depth of 5 m where it was

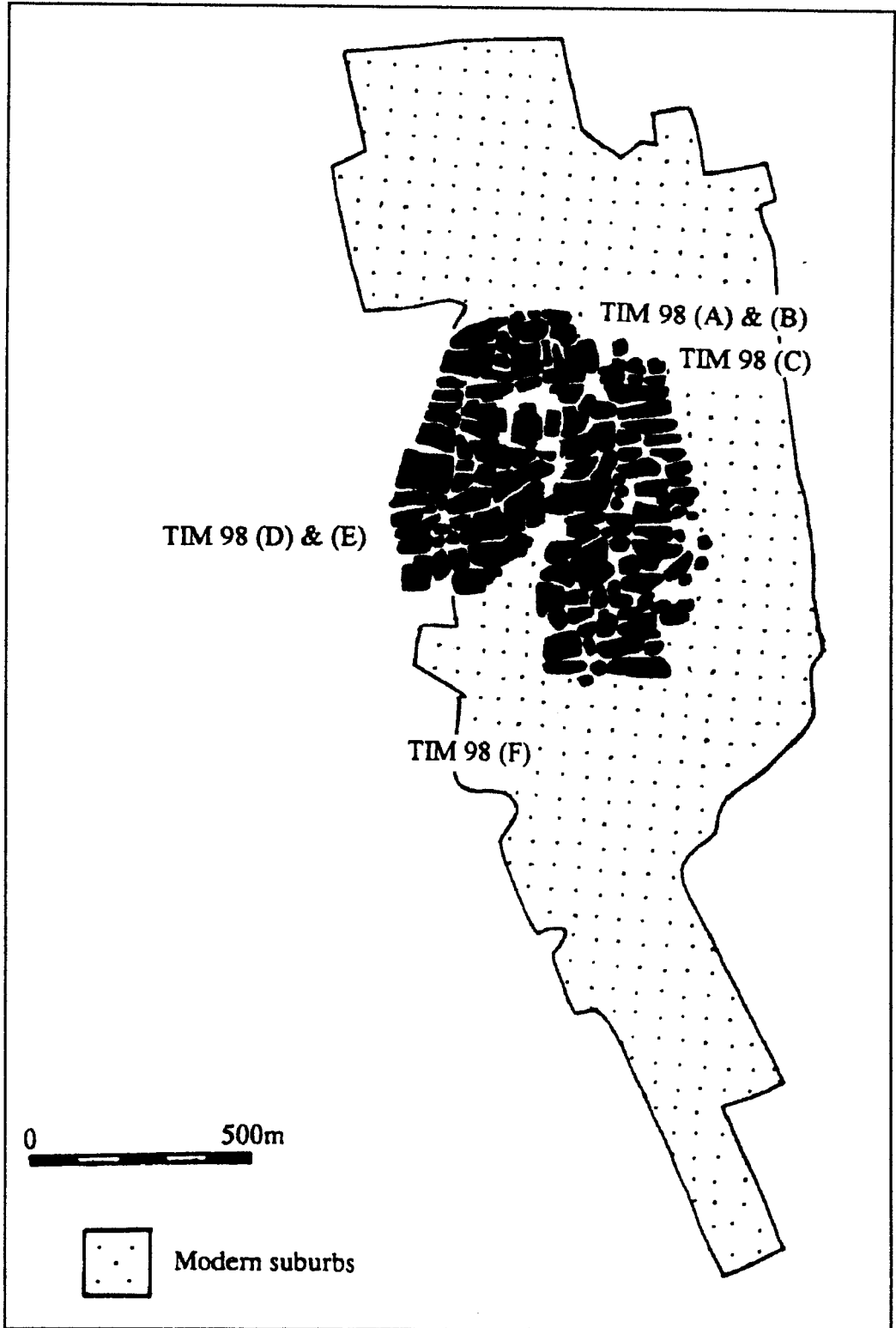
again terminated for safety reasons owing to concerns over proceeding further in an unshored trench of 2 m<sup>2</sup> (timber for shoring purposes being impossible to obtain, and time precluding stepping the trench). A good understanding of the stratigraphy was obtained from this excavation with numerous occupation levels interspersed with layers of wind blown sand recorded, indicating the long sequence of occupation in the Sankore area.

A single C14 date was obtained from the base of the sequence (TIM 98 B 25) of 170 ± 40 BP or 1780 ± 40 AD (GX-24763-AMS). The recent date of the deposits was confirmed by the presence of tobacco pipe fragments present throughout the sequence. Tobacco pipes were in fact present at each site excavated. By way of contrast no tobacco pipe fragments were found in any of the excavations at Gao, a much earlier foundation, as both the archaeology and historical sources indicate (Insoll 1996). However, the base of the deposits was not reached in the test pits excavated in the Sankore quarter, owing to the safety considerations already outlined, it is therefore probable that the earlier "pre-tobacco" layers lie further down, and are as yet uninvestigated. Further collection and collation of oral tradition also indicated that the previously posited identification between this area of Timbuktu and the reputed Moroccan Casbah was erroneous, with this area reputedly to be found in another part of Timbuktu (Ould Sidi pers. comm.).

### TIM 98 (C)

A third 2 m<sup>2</sup> sondage was started approximately 100 m east of TIM 98 (A) and (B) and immediately adjacent to the northern wall of the Sankore mosque, itself traditionally assigned a fourteenth century foundation date. This excavation unit was assigned the code TIM 98 (C) (Figure 1), and permission to excavate in such close proximity to the mosque was obtained from the Imam. Again a deep column of deposits was uncovered before excavation was finished (also for safety reasons) at a depth of 5 m. Unlike TIM 98 (B) the first definite occupation layer encountered in this trench was not reached until 4.6 m. This consisted of a floor made of Timbuktu "stone" (calcaire - a type of hard clay) and of banco. Above this layer multiple wind and water lain sand deposits were evident in the stratigraphic profile. One water lain layer was especially

Figure 1: Test excavations in the Sankore quarter, Timbuktu.



noticeable at a depth of approximately 3m through the presence of over 200 shells of what appear to be a freshwater species. A single C14 date was obtained from near the base of the sequence (TIM 98 C 23) of  $240 \pm 40$  BP or  $1710 \pm 40$  AD (GX-24764-AMS).

TIM 98 (C) can be interpreted as a column of deposits associated with the Sankore mosque, perhaps through rebuilding, with debris occasionally dumped in the area, represented by animal bones, pipe fragments, occasional glass and stone bracelet fragments, beads and pottery sherds. Of interest with regard to the pottery sherds is the fact that the majority were very abraded, indicating wind and water erosion, in comparison to those from TIM 98 (B).

### TIM 98 (D) and (E)

At the opposite western end of the city two further 2 m<sup>2</sup> sondages were also completed, both of which remain undated at present. TIM 98 (D) was situated on a large mound identified in the 1996 survey as a further possible zone of early occupation (Insoll 1998) (Figure 1). Excavation revealed that the material on this mound, in fact a dune, was only 60-80 cm deep. Below this, sterile natural white dune sand was encountered, and excavation was thus halted at a depth of 1 m. The dune was covered with a thin layer of modern and medieval rubbish and thus superficially resembled a tell site.

A fifth 2 m<sup>2</sup> sondage, TIM 98 (E), was excavated to the west of TIM 98 (D) close to the Hotel Bouctou (Figure 1). This site was pointed out to us by Dr. Ali Ould Sidi who remembered it in former years as an island standing high amongst the seasonal flood waters which used to reach as far as Timbuktu from the River Niger. Our excavations indicated that the archaeological layers, a mix of banco and compacted sand, did not extend below 1.4 m. This site appears to have been an area of temporary occupation over many years. Excavation was finished at a depth of 2 m with the final 60 cm composed of sterile white sand.

### TIM 98 (F)

Thanks to information received from a Belgian engineer working for the energy department in Timbuktu it proved possible to visit the site

of a large excavation being undertaken to build a reservoir next to the power station in the southern quarter of Sareykeina (Figure 1). Here, excavation for building work had uncovered a variety of remains including a burial oriented east - west (and hence not Muslim), along with several rubbish pits. Two of the latter were visible in section and it proved possible to obtain a selection of tobacco pipes, useful for comparative purposes. It was also noted that sterile sand was present at a depth of 2 m in this area of Timbuktu.

### The Finds

As already noted, tobacco pipes were present in every excavation, indicating the comparatively recent date of the sites, supported as regards TIM 98 B and C by the C14 dates obtained. The recovery of such large quantities of pipes from stratified contexts is of importance as it will now allow a reliable typology of these artifacts to be constructed, something absent to date. Similarly, a typology of the local pottery can be constructed (a non-biased 50 percent sample was kept from each site). This pottery is almost wholly of types not found in the excavations in Gao (Insoll 1996, in preparation), again indicating the differences between the two cities. The same can be said of the glass bracelet fragments and the beads. All this material was transported to the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Bamako, and the bulk of the small finds and pottery reference sherds have been transported to the U.K. for analysis, which is now in progress. It should be noted that contrary to usual practice it was decided not to keep the faunal remains from the excavations. The main reasons for this being the exploratory nature of the excavations, a series of test-pits, and the fact that it would be impossible to interpret anything from such small-scale excavations. The primary objective of this phase of the research was to obtain an understanding of the sub-surface archaeology of Timbuktu and to obtain dating material. However, as at Gao, all faunal and botanical material will of course be kept once the larger scale research excavations begin in the near future.

### Future Work and Conclusions

Having completed this preliminary phase of archaeological research in Timbuktu it is evident

that much more prospecting must take place before full-scale research excavations can begin. It is also apparent that archaeological research in Timbuktu poses several challenges. These include the great depth of the deposits and the dangers posed in excavating them using a conventional (unshored) 2 x 2m test pit. Information again received from the Belgian engineer indicated that 15m of occupation deposits exist in some areas of Timbuktu, such a depth being encountered during the recent construction of a new water tower in the city.

To overcome this problem it is proposed that a coring programme using a motorised boring machine will be undertaken, and thus similar to research completed in the town of Djenne to the south-west of Timbuktu in the Inland Niger Delta (McIntosh et.al. 1996). The use of a coring machine will allow multiple cores to be taken rapidly and, importantly, safely, in all parts of the city. Following on from this further exploratory work, an appropriate methodology can be developed and research excavations can finally begin.

In summary, the brief 1998 season of archaeological prospection in Timbuktu has provided interesting and important results, both practically and methodologically. Practically, as already noted, a basic understanding of something of the occupation sequences in the various quarters of Timbuktu is now known, and the first ever excavations within the city have been completed. Methodologically, the steps needed to complete the archaeological investigation of the origins and development of Timbuktu are now understood i.e. the implementation of a coring programme prior to large-scale research excavation. Furthermore, the differences between what might be indicated on the surface, and what in reality exists below ground were made obvious, something impossible to achieve without excavation, and perhaps best attested by the results of TIM 98 (D). The next season is scheduled for spring 2000, and a display of the results from the research in Timbuktu and Gao can be seen in a small exhibition currently running in the British Museum in London (John Addis Gallery).

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